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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: ARRESTS IN MARKELOV MURDER BOOST GOR  
ANTI-NATIONALIST CREDENTIALS

REF: MOSCOW 135

Classified By: Pol Minister Counselor Susan Elliott for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: Authorities have arrested two suspects in the January 20 murder of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and Novaya Gazeta journalist Anastasia Baburova. The suspects were allegedly members of an ultranationalist group known as Unified Brigade 88, who murdered Markelov as revenge for his work to put fellow ultranationalists behind bars after the murder of anti-fascist Aleksandr Ryukhin in 2006. With some exceptions, rights activists found the official explanation for the crime credible, but they doubted that the two suspects were the only people involved in the crime, and hoped for more investigation. The GOR appears more likely to enjoy the PR coup and close the case with these two suspects.  
End Summary.

Official version "quite credible"

12. (SBU) On November 4, authorities arrested two suspects in the January 20 murder of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and Novaya Gazeta journalist Anastasia Baburova. On the following day, the Basmany District Court authorized the arrest and ruled that the suspects' detention should be extended, calling them a flight risk. According to Federal Security Service (FSB) head Aleksandr Bortnikov, the two suspects, Nikita Tikhonov and Yevgenia Khasis, were members of an ultranationalist group known as Unified Brigade 88. (Note: Some media initially reported that the two belonged to the banned ultranationalist group Russian National Unity, but this was later modified. End note.) Bortnikov said that the two suspects had been identified during a crackdown on extremist groups in Moscow, and that Tikhonov had confessed to the crime.

13. (C) At the time of the Markelov murder, speculation was rife as to the perpetrator and motive, since Markelov had made many enemies during his activist career (reftel). As Aleksandr Verkhovskiy of the anti-extremist NGO SOVA explained to Radio Svoboda on November 6 that if the two suspects were in fact ultranationalists, this would provide a plausible motive for the killing. Markelov acted as the lawyer for the family of Aleksandr Ryukhin, an anti-fascist activist whom ultranationalists killed in 2006. One of the suspects in that killing was a Nikita Tikhonov, who went into hiding after the murder and was never apprehended, but who saw many of his friends jailed in the case. Verkhovsky consequently told reporters that he found this theory of the Markelov killing to be "quite credible." He added that -- assuming this was the same Nikita Tikhonov -- "he might have considered Markelov a personal enemy." Verkhovsky's SOVA colleague Galina Kozhevnikova agreed, pointing out that it was largely due to Markelov's work that the defendants in the Ryukhin case received significant prison sentences.

But probably not the whole story

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14. (C) Some commentators questioned the validity of the official version of the crime. Lev Ponomarev of For Human Rights told us November 6 that he thought that the suspects might be "fall guys," allowing authorities to pick up a couple of hapless misfits and thus avoid a proper investigation. He said that he found it "strange" that the suspects were shown in masks that covered their face completely, even their eyes, and that this suggested possible pressure on the suspects to play along and confess. (Note: Ponomarev also said that that Khasis's brother had called him asking for his help as a human rights defender, which gave him pause regarding the defendants' guilt. End note.) Ponomarev alluded to the Politkovskaya case as another example that showed, in his opinion, how authorities sometimes substitute the arrest of "small fry" for an investigation of those truly guilty of the crime. Other commentators, including Kozhevnikova, stated that the professional nature of the killing -- the perpetrator easily escaped into the metro after shooting Markelov point-blank on a crowded street in broad daylight -- suggested someone with military experience rather than ultranationalists.

15. (C) According to Allison Gill of Human Rights Watch, the professional style of the murder does not preclude ultranationalist involvement. She told us November 6 that a number of undercover reporters, for example from the BBC, had filmed videos of ultranationalist groups engaged in paramilitary training. "They plan their operations carefully," Gill said. However, for that very reason, Gill believed, "it is unlikely that these two suspects acted

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alone." Noting that such groups tend to work in a coordinated fashion, Gill posited that the mastermind of the killing is probably still at large, and said that for that reason she would urge authorities to continue investigating.

GOR pats itself on the back  
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16. (C) However, judging by the self-satisfied tone of the scripted dialogue between President Medvedev and Bortnikov on the Kremlin's website on November 6, it would be surprising to see an investigation that went beyond those already arrested. Medvedev said that such a case "without any doubt" falls into the category not only of serious crimes, but also those with "great social resonance." Expressing his approval that the case was solved in such a short time, he told Bortnikov that he hoped "such reports would come regularly." For his part, Bortnikov alleged that the suspects had been involved in a racial murder in September as well, and were planning a third killing before the police apprehended them.

17. (C) Verkhovsky said that he thought that authorities had greatly improved their record of arresting ultranationalists, and that one could see the results in a decrease in attacks this year. In the past some authorities have encouraged or even directly supported ultranationalism, and backing off from that stance is a complicated and awkward process. Since it is not always easy to liquidate these groups, Verkhovsky said, the logic that follows is, "we must try to manipulate them." He added: "I think that often an official thinks that he is manipulating a certain neonationalist group, but the group may actually be manipulating him."

Comment  
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18. (C) The official explanation of the crime appears likely, but whatever the ultimate truth behind the case, it is clear that the GOR will happily take this opportunity to burnish its image as an opponent of ultranationalism and racism. Putin's creation of the November 4 Day of National Unity as a modern substitute for October Revolution Day has been an

effective tool to stir up nationalist sentiment, but ultranationalism at times causes the GOR more problems than it solves, and besmirches its image internationally. With arrests like this one, the good PR is the easy part; the overall attempt to edge away from the nationalist date that the GOR brought to the dance may prove more difficult.

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